TECHNICIAN RECOGNITION

Larry Browne shares his personal view on upcoming technician registration.

It looks as if it is finally going to happen. Statutory registration of PCDs is on track to become a reality next year and there is a growing awareness of its effect on the groups involved. My interest is of course dental technology.

I have long been in favour of a recognised and respected register that recorded the names of those technicians with a known qualification, either academic or vocational, fitting them to carry on the craft and profession of technical dentistry. Indeed it is over 40 years since I first registered on the advice of my then employer, a dentist, who was adamant that official recognition of the dental technician would not come unless there were a clear and open measure of the education and development pathways. I am

sure he was right then and I am confident it is right now to pursue the goal of recognition.

Today, across the UK, anyone with the inclination can offer themselves as fitted to construct appliances for patients without reference to their training or experience. This is a situation that has been allowed to go on for far too long. It has undermined the case for better remuneration and quality by allowing the use of process workers on an *ad hoc* basis. The onus for the quality control was placed firmly in the hands of the clinician whose training and knowledge of technical dentistry has diminished alongside shrinking budgets within the undergraduate and, often, postgraduate centres. No wonder the standard and quality continues to fall.

technician registration:

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Time to stop the rot? It's long overdue. Restorative and corrective dentistry needs a well-trained professional team working closely and ethically together in the interests of the patient. The historical master/servant relationships will be seen as unfitted to the demands of ever more educated and aware patients. Restorative provision will inevitably become more privately funded and bring with it an increased awareness of potential treatment outcomes. Almost all of the major advances in restorative dentistry in the past decade are high tech with an equally high price tag. Government budgets, however structured, cannot keep pace with the demand.

Closer working relationships between technician and clinician are an inevitable consequence of the greater specialisation of the knowledge requirements. Technical dentistry demands a full time involvement and a continuing educational commitment. Clinical specialisation is increasing due to the concerns of bodies such as the GDC. Specialist registers are now a requirement for certain clinical procedures. Oral surgery, orthodontics and endodontics, whilst still within the remit of the general dentist, are increasingly becoming seen as requiring some specialist qualification and this trend will undoubtedly continue. Without registration dental technology could not be brought into that basket

of specialists. With registration and a continued post graduate CPD the status and worth of the technical expert will continue to grow and be valued. Inevitably a worthwhile career path, offering the status and remuneration to compete with IT, plumbing, bricklaying etc, may begin to attract school and graduate leavers back to what I believe is a unique and interesting career path. Technically demanding and hugely satisfying but unfortunately (with few exceptions) poorly rewarded and misunderstood.

In a recent article in *The Dental Technician*, Steve Judge made the point that seeing the laboratory technician and the laboratory as an added value to a restorative practice made good sense. More and more clinicians are embracing that philosophy and encouraging

an appreciation by the patient of the skill and bespoke nature of their appliance/restoration. Steve went further and suggested we should mirror dental smile week with promotion of the laboratory services and even encouraging open house visits to suitable premises. Let the public know what is available and what trouble and training lies behind the denture, crown, veneer or implant restoration. The work of Max Fac technicians offers a unique appeal to the general public. Their progress in achieving recognition within the profession owes much to the work of people like Brian Conroy, widely respected throughout technical dentistry, who had to push and push to establish his group and their skills as worthy of the status and respect they now enjoy.

technician registration

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Registration will of course bring with it the responsibilities hitherto held solely by the dentist. It will be necessary for technicians to have professional indemnity insurance. As registered professionals they will be responsible for the suitability of materials, procedures and designs used and in the event of a patient complaint or litigation be able to show they have followed the agreed guidelines and protocols. They will be required to pay their annual registration fee and to avoid criminal pursuits. Undoubtedly there will be some political 'horse trading' over the coming years. Many areas will need to be discussed and finally agreed but the inevitable outcome will be more supervision and interference in our daily lives from appointed bodies; more transparency for the patient and general public; more responsibility to comply and, hopefully, the status and reward which we have long sought.

So I would say to my technician colleagues, do attend the various road shows, check on your qualifications and register when required. I believe it will be the beginning of a different and much improved career structure for future generations of dental technicians. If we do not grasp this opportunity to govern ourselves we will face the prospect of further decline and disintegration. Our patients need our expertise and enthusiasm – let's not disappoint them.

While registration will be under the aegis of the GDC, my hope is that the recognition and status that should accrue will embolden the technician to strengthen his position as an equal and essential member of the dental team.

It may even be that the technician who works with the various materials and methods marketed as the latest and best will be given the responsibility of testing and approving such materials instead of the present situation where the largest publicity budget, aimed at the clinician, produces demand for substandard and often very short lived and unsuitable restorations. There is a healthy and increasing demand for evidence-based claims within the profession. Perhaps we may not all agree with the NICE guidelines but we surely do believe

in the need for guidelines and controls to balance the, often, overbearing commercial interests. I think I am right in saying that the recognition and status that will follow registration will allow for better integration of the technical expert within the dental team. It will allow and encourage greater responsibility and reward for the dental technician specialist and ensure a continuity, which at present is sorely threatened, of the best possible technical support for our patients.

I firmly believe the momentum is now unstoppable. The GDC, very recently, accepted the Gateways Group recommendations for registration. There will be a two year 'Grandfather clause' period after which a recognised BTEC or higher qualification will be required to register.